

of the apparent parity between subject and effect: regression delivers regression. But things don't always work like this, especially in *The Baby*. Perhaps there's a kind of double negative at work here, where regression plus regression equals self-consciousness. But the main reason I think *The Baby* is so disturbing is because it is a drama. Highly problematic subjects are generally dealt with in genres that have license to be more "unrealistic." In both horror and comedy films, for example, there is more distance and removal. Infantilism has been a fairly common theme in Hollywood recently, as evidenced by a number of role-reversal comedies, such as *Big* (dir. Penny Marshall, 1988). The problems that *The Baby* posed are revealed very clearly in how the film was packaged and publicized. The print ads portray the film as either horror or soft-core porn, neither of which is really accurate. The film is shot in a very unexpressive, "realist" style, and there is nothing in it that points overtly to its *filmic* nature. No embellishments such as fancy color, elaborate camera movement, or disruptive cinematography break through its uniform facade. In fact, the film reminds me quite a bit of a television docudrama—hardly surprising, since Ted Post has been one of television's longest-working directors.⁷ In the end the repressive, almost puritanical, style directs our full attention to the film's story line.

But this absorption does not come easily, however, because the film is decidedly amoral. When dramas tackle controversial subjects, they generally do so by taking on the role of a doctor. They seem to issue an implicit, but terse, command: "This is strong medicine, but it must be swallowed for your own good." It's instructive to consider *The Baby* in light of the recent popular fixation on issues of child abuse. The theaters and airwaves are flooded with dramas (such as *Bump in the Night*, dir. Karen Arthur, 1991) dealing with abuse and incest, which almost uniformly adopt the strictest of tones. In order properly to excuse the audience's morbid fascination with such themes, a clear moral message must be given, a lesson has to be learned. By contrast, *The Baby* comes off as almost surrealist. It seems to proclaim: "Desire above all." And, we are left to wonder, whose desire, what desire?

The dynamics of viewer and character identification in *The Baby* are very complex. At one level, the film could be seen as a simple Oedipal fantasy in which a person (male) is allowed to stay an infant in what would normally be a completely nurturing (female) universe. But, as it turns out, gender roles are not so clear in this film. The mothers are *bad* mothers, and, following from this, in a sense become "fathers." Baby is saved, but how is he saved? He is rescued not to be gently ushered into adulthood—as we are at first led to believe—but to remain a baby and to be *mothered*.